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Governor's Criminal Justice Volunteer Service Awards

By Oliver J. Bell, Chairman



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Each spring, the Texas Board of Criminal Justice has the honor of hosting the Governor's Criminal Justice Volunteer Service Awards Ceremony.

Since 1995, these service awards have honored individuals who unselfishly give of themselves to assist in the rehabilitation of offenders and to provide the offenders with hope and opportunities for a better life.

Currently, the TDCJ has more than 21,000 approved volunteers serving in various roles, assisting within the agency and the community. During FY 2013, these individuals gave more than 459,000 hours of valuable service, making a difference in the future of our state. These volunteers work with Chaplaincy, provide education, aid offenders during reentry, assist victims and work in departmental offices providing endless support. This article highlights a few of those individuals recognized during the 20th Annual Governor's Criminal Justice Volunteer Service Awards Ceremony, held in Austin on April 17.

The recipient of the Carol S. Vance Volunteer of the Year for 2015 is Tom Owens. Tom has

been a constant InnerChange Freedom Initiative mentor since the program's inception in 1997. Since that time he has mentored hundreds of IFI participants. During his tenure as a mentor he has initiated several programs that are currently staples of the IFI program. In 1998, as a board member of the Houston Habitat for Humanity, he recommended that IFI offenders participate in the Jimmy Carter "Build 100 Houses in 10 Days" project in Houston. As a result, IFI offenders participated in the project and continue to contribute hundreds of community service hours weekly to Houston Habitat for Humanity. Last Year, IFI offenders participated in building 210 homes.

In 2005, Tom approached the IFI and TDCJ about conducting Prison Fellowship's Angel Tree Celebrations inside of the Carol Vance Unit in Richmond, Texas. As a result, each year hundreds of children have enjoyed the opportunity to celebrate Christmas with their incarcerated fathers, leading to the reconciliation of many offenders with their families. Tom's recruiting efforts have contributed to the success of IFI's mentoring program since he began mentoring. It has been through his advocacy that our volunteer mentors continue to grow. Serving as a Prison Fellowship Advisory Board member, Tom's influence was a key factor in Prison Fellowship's deci-

sion to launch the IFI program in Texas. The program has positively impacted thousands of prisoners and their families. Finally, in addition to his volunteer efforts, he has also provided financial contributions to the program. He has not only enriched the lives of the offender mentees, but staff as well.

This year, the TDCJ Employee Volunteer Award was given to George Nelson, who is employed at the Huntsville Unit with the Information Technology Division. His service description includes serving as the Chairperson for the Christian Restorative Justice Mentors Association. He works with youthful offenders by developing a way for the young men to be productive upon their release, and involving them in things of God. He also coordinates the New Birth Bible Study, which has been going on for the past 30 years. This bible study is designed to help men develop and mentor other men as they have been taught. Mr. Nelson also serves as a coordinator for marriage seminars to help offenders maintain their relationship with their spouses. He also helps coordinate the Possum Talks Parenting Workshop which takes place three times per year, helping to give offenders methods to maintain a healthy relationship with their children while incarcerated.

Warden James Jones was also recognized at

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this year's ceremony. Warden Jones is a leader who has provided significant programming objectives on the Huntsville Unit. He attends and supports graduations, seminars and special events on the unit, and serves as a special speaker at many of the functions he attends. He is very involved in the administration of the busy chaplaincy programming to ensure successful events. Warden Jones and his staff work closely with other agency departments and divisions to ensure the execution process is seamless for both the victim's family and friends, as well as the offender and their family. Amidst many other responsibilities, Warden Jones ensures all indigent offenders who pass away while in-

carcerated are provided a dignified funeral at the Joe Byrd Cemetery located near the Huntsville Unit. Because of his support for success of the rehabilitation of offenders, Warden James Jones has been selected to receive the Criminal Justice Administrator Award.

The names of all 21 award recipients honored at this year's event are noted in the table provided. Information on each of this year's recipients is available on the TDCJ website.

The service of these individuals and organizations, as well as the tens of thousands of other volunteers working within the TDCJ,

is invaluable. They play an important role across the state. In recognition of their service, I ask that each of you join me in extending our appreciation to the volunteers that are working among us. Their hard work and devotion make a difference in the lives of our offenders and their families. Volunteers provide valuable tools that genuinely assist the rehabilitative efforts of this agency. They are making a valuable contribution to the betterment of our community and our state. They have our deepest gratitude and our utmost respect. ●

<i>Recipient</i>	<i>Award</i>
Maureen Whiteside	Chaplaincy Department
John T. Thornbury	Correctional Institutions Division
Military Veteran Peer Network	Reentry and Integration Division
Ruby M. Woodward	Nancy Hees Award - Parole Division
Jessie Mojica	Private Facility Contract Monitoring/Oversight Division
Chainbreaker Ministry	Religious Service
Terry Theall-Jones	Religious Service
Martha "Marti" Martin	Sex Offender Rehabilitation
Shirley Miller	Substance Abuse Treatment Program
Jessica Middleton	Pathfinder Award - Victim Services Division
Charles M. Fisk	Judy Burd Award - Windham School District
William "Bill" Kleiber	Restorative Justice
Alice Smith-San Saba Offender Choir	Susan Cranford Award – Female Offender Program
The Winning Edge	Most Innovative Program
Hospitality House of Huntsville	Community Service
"Honor Thy Father"	Best Family Program
LaDonna Bell	Leonard Davis Award for Most Hours Served
Antonio Morga	Extensive Travel
George Nelson	TDCJ Employee Volunteer
James Jones	Criminal Justice Administrator
Tom Owens	Carol S. Vance Volunteer of the Year